

Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet Hearing

H.R. 3101: The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act

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June 10, 2010

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Good morning. Today the Subcommittee examines a measure introduced by our colleague Mr. Markey that seeks to update the laws governing access to communications services by individuals with disabilities.

There are almost one million Americans who have severe or profound hearing loss and more than one million who are legally blind. Four percent of our population has great difficulty hearing, and an additional three percent are visually impaired.

Moreover, as much as some of us might not want to admit it, Americans are aging. There are approximately 40 million people over the age of 65 living in the United States today, or 13 percent of the population. One estimate shows that by 2050, that number will more than double to 88.5 million, or an estimated one-fifth of the population. Naturally, this growth in our aging

population will be accompanied by an increase in the number of Americans who are vision or hearing-impaired and who will need accessible communications products and services.

With the explosion in Internet delivered services both the variety of information and entertainment offerings and the complexity and variety of the devices that receive those services have multiplied.

Our challenge is to assure that all Americans can benefit from those advances, including individuals with vision or hearing impairments.

We will learn this morning about the steps industry is already taking to make services and devices accessible by the vision or hearing impaired.

For example, my iPhone can be made accessible to the visually-impaired straight out of the box, with the touch of a button. With the rapid growth of smartphones, an increasing number of Americans can download inexpensive third-party applications that perform functions like text-to-speech and speech-to-text.

In the video programming space, an increasing amount of video content available on the Internet is now captioned, including the video programming of Disney, CBS, noncommercial station WGBH and videos on YouTube. CBS offers video description of its television programming notwithstanding the absence of any legal requirement that it do so.

These industry steps mark progress. The question now is what requirements government should consider imposing that will move beyond the encouraging voluntary actions industry has taken to date so as to ensure that a greater range of services and devices are broadly accessible to people with disabilities.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act. We have come a long way in the two decades since 1990, but we can go further both in terms of voluntary steps by industry and targeted regulation to ensure the accessibility of technology for persons with disabilities. H.R. 3101 provides a starting point for our consideration.

I appreciate that all of the stakeholders at the witness table today have been engaging with us on a bipartisan basis to reach consensus on revisions to H.R. 3101. And I look forward to our continued work together, and to our successful conclusion of that work.

I thank the witnesses for their attendance today. I also want to thank Sgt. Major Acosta for his service and sacrifice for our country.

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